

# FORUM LETTER

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## Ponder it well



“The Gospel is so clear that there is little need of learned interpretation. It is only necessary to ponder it well, to contemplate it, and to take it completely into your heart. . . . Notice how ordinarily and simply things take place on earth, and yet they are held in such high respect in heaven! This is what takes place on earth: there is a poor, young woman, Mary, in Nazareth. Nobody pays any attention to her, and she is considered to be one of the least significant inhabitants of the town. Nobody realizes the great wonder she is carrying. She is silent, does not put on airs, and considers herself the lowliest person in the town. She starts out on the journey with Joseph, her husband. . . . Then when they came to Bethlehem, they were the most insignificant, the most despised people, as the evangelist indicates. They were obliged to make room for everybody, until they were shown into a stable and had to be satisfied to share with the animals a common hostel. . . . Thus God indicates that he pays no attention at all to what the world is or has or can do, and on the other hand the world proves that it knows nothing at all of, and pays no attention to, what God is or has or does. Behold, this is the first symbol wherewith Christ puts to shame the world and indicates that all of its doing, knowledge, and being are contemptible to us, that its greatest wisdom is in reality foolishness, that its best performance is wrongdoing, and that its greatest good is evil. What did Bethlehem really have, when it had not Christ?” — Martin Luther, “The Gospel for Christmas Eve” (*Luther's Works*, Am. Ed., vol. 52; Fortress Press, 1974)

## The uncertain future



As 2008 comes to the end of its run, it is probably inevitable (maybe even salutary) that people begin to think about the future and what it will bring. We human beings are usually wrong when we speculate about such things, of course, because the future has a way of veering off in completely unexpected directions. But that is no reason to ignore it.

The future was on the minds of the bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as they met in October. Always in the fall there is a crop of new “baby bishops” on board, and so the Conference of Bishops no doubt needs to find its new equilibrium. Always their agenda is full, and often it is grueling. But this time “the future” was one matter of concern, and particularly the potential financial impact of two realities.

The first concern is what the current economic downturn might mean for the church. That’s one shared by every parish pastor, trying to negotiate “stewardship season” this fall while the bad financial news kept showing up on the front pages of the newspaper. In my congregation, the council is nervous

that in tough times people are a little more cautious about their giving. It shouldn't be that way, of course, but we sense that it is. A few years ago when things were getting a little tight in the church budget, this pastor didn't get a pay raise. I told the congregation that I had decided, in light of this situation, that I was going to increase my pledge. Maybe that was manipulative, but I meant it quite sincerely. I may get a chance to do it again this year.

The impulse to cut back also happens corporately. Congregations in tough times think about—and sometimes more than think about—cutting back their benevolence giving to the synod. Synods think about cutting back their giving to churchwide. Everybody gets nervous about it. If ELCA leaders are concerned about money right now, who could blame them? It's the stupid economy.

But of course it is more than the economy. It is what might happen at the 2009 churchwide assembly with regard to the sexuality study. There are some who fear that the assembly's decisions about sex will negatively impact giving—starting with the unhappy parishioner, and working its way up to an income problem for the ELCA as a whole.

This was stated rather explicitly at the Conference of Bishops meeting by the ELCA treasurer, who advised the bishops to be doing some “contingency planning” in case the economy, the sexuality study or some combination thereof results in a sharp drop in financial resources. No doubt sound and prudent advice, though it is a bit discouraging if the bishops are thinking about the sexuality debate primarily in financial terms. Shouldn't the real fear be that we may make a decision that is unfaithful?

It is good to be aware, however, that theological or doctrinal or disciplinary decisions may have financial impact. No matter what decisions are made, some people are going to be unhappy—in some cases, very unhappy. The Episcopal Church has watched as congregations and even whole dioceses have withdrawn from the national church. It would be interesting to know what the financial implications have been—interesting, though of course not decisive, one way or the other. Christians shouldn't make decisions based on fears or anxieties, but in trust and faith, knowing that God's good and gracious will always provides for us. Still, I would not be surprised to hear someone at the churchwide assembly express concern about the financial disaster that might be looming if the assembly does this or that. If and when that financial disaster arrives, it will be difficult to ignore.

“The anxiety level is rising,” one bishop remarked, “because of money, sexuality, and declining membership.” None of these are new concerns, but the events that have tossed them into the same box in our day rush on apace. Preoccupation with sexuality appears to correspond with declining membership, and declining membership is not unrelated to fears about money. What is worse is that nobody seems to know what to do about it, or at least nobody is inclined to do it. Every “extraordinary ordination,” every bishop who looks the other way at overt violations of the church's standards, takes us further down the tragic path the Episcopalians are following.

— by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

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## The blue-ribbon future of Missouri

by John Hannah



*Walking Together* – *The LCMS Future* is the report of the “Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance” charged with proposing revisions to the synod's structure. You can read the six-page document by going to [www.lcms.org](http://www.lcms.org) and clicking on “Walking Together.” You can, and you really should.

The LCMS has the distinction of being the

only Lutheran body in the U. S. that has neither broken away from nor merged with another Lutheran body in all of its history—some 160 years. Its present structure has therefore simply evolved over time, without much deliberate thought, and an update might well be due. Our recent well-publicized theological tensions probably play a small part in the desire for some change. Many in the LCMS are saying, “Let's get that stuff behind us and move on!”

### No flow charts

The subtitle indicates the report's nature and tenor: *Proposals and Possibilities for Consideration and Discussion*. No decisive conclusions are offered; no scheme of reorganization complete with flow charts. There are no recommendations, but merely "possibilities for discussion." The task force does not tinker with the organization; rather it invites us to do so by responding at [lcmsfuture@lcms.org](mailto:lcmsfuture@lcms.org).

Throughout the report congregations are treated as the primary organizational unit of the church. That is good; congregations are primary because they are eucharistic assemblies. So the first area of consideration is entitled "Congregations and Districts." Here the task force weighs the possibility of smaller districts (about 60 congregations each) or larger ones (about 300-350 congregations each). Older readers may remember *Forum Letter's* advocacy for smaller judicatories when the ELCA was formed – advice that was ignored. Maybe the time for small districts has now come. I hope so for the sake of our eucharistic assemblies, whose presidents (no suggestion here to change terminology to "bishops") "could better support and encourage the mission" of congregations. Creating larger districts would only serve to foster the idea that the eucharistic assembly is a franchised local outlet of the national corporation.

Turning to the section on "Congregations and the National Synod," we can expect to see a healthy examination of staffing at the International Center in St. Louis. The basic criterion will be the ability to support the eucharistic assemblies. Those executives who remain might report directly to the synodical president, something they do not do now. Others may be deployed to specific regions. The task force also raises the possibility of six-year terms (instead of three) for all elected officials.

### It's tradition

The third section concerns elections, the importance of which overshadows the eucharistic assembly in many LCMS minds. In a section on "Congregations, Membership, and Conventions," the task force keeps the principle of having the number of ordained delegates equal that of lay delegates. (They offer no reason; it's apparently just tradition.) The proposals offer a variety of ways to broaden representation from both smaller congregations and lar-

ger congregations. It asks if a reduced number of voting delegates to the national convention is possible. Could they be elected by district conventions rather than circuit meetings? Here is much grist for the mill of those politically inclined who like to calculate electoral advantage for their interests.

But perhaps intending to address that political reality, the task force raises an intriguing possibility. Could we alternate between a "general" convention every six years and a "focused" convention in the alternate cycle? General conventions would include "the Divine Call" (not "election"!) of the president and auxiliary officers, highlighting the pastoral rather than political aspects of the respective offices. "Focused" conventions would address theological issues which nowadays dominate each Missouri convention. By alternating we would have to put up with the politics only once every six years.

With regard to theological decisions, the task force proposes the possibility of requiring two-thirds approval for binding doctrinal resolutions. Fair enough; if a decision is vital for each and every eucharistic assembly, two-thirds agreement by their representatives is a minimum expectation. That is the difference between "walking together" and "forced march."

### Leave Missouri behind?

There are some interesting miscellaneous suggestions. One is to change the name from the anachronistic Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. No alternative name is proposed, which seems to guarantee that this will go nowhere.

Then, instead of seminaries having sole control over the certification of pastoral candidates, the task force proposes giving district presidents and eucharistic assemblies a voice. With the widening gap between seminary academic life and parish life, it seems a brilliant idea.

So stay tuned, pitch in, watch it all unfold. Don't expect much soon; after 160 years, Missouri adapts only very carefully and slowly. There probably won't be any change for five years. But at least the conversation has begun.

*John Hannah is pastor of a eucharistic assembly called Trinity Lutheran in the Bronx, NY. He is also currently President of the Board of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau.*

## Mary, ever-virgin? But we're Lutherans!

by William Weedon



Because Lutherans are not immune to the historical amnesia that characterizes our age, it is not surprising that they react with shock when they read in the Lutheran confessions such words as these: "The Son became man in this manner: He was conceived, without cooperation of man, by the Holy Spirit and was born of the pure, holy and [Latin: ever-] Virgin Mary." [Tappert, SA I 1:4] Or these: "Therefore, she is truly the mother of God and yet has remained a virgin." [Tappert, FC SD VIII:24] What was rather a commonplace to earlier generations of Lutherans has become all but a novelty among us in this day and age: the notion that Blessed Mary remained a virgin until her death.

Now, note the use of the word "until" in the previous sentence. Quite obviously I did not mean that *after* her death she ceased to be a virgin! The word "until" doesn't work that way. It doesn't necessarily say diddly about what comes afterwards. Its attention is fixed on "up to that point." So, St. Jerome and the Lutheran Reformers argued, we must understand the "until" in Matthew 1: "He did not know her until she had given birth to a son." The "until" there — *eos* — says nothing about what happened next; it does not imply that after the birth of Jesus, she lost her virginity in the usual way.

### Sisters and brothers

But doesn't the Bible teach that Jesus had brothers and sisters? Indeed it does. But a brother or sister does not mean, necessarily, a son or daughter of Mary. In fact, it is rather striking that they are never called Mary's children in the Sacred Scriptures and that at the cross our omniscient Lord (who realized that St. James, at least, among his brothers would shortly be a believer and leader of the Church) entrusted the Blessed Mother into the care and keeping of St. John. For centuries Christians understood this as a clear indication that Mary had no other offspring to look after her.

How did the early Lutherans speak of this? Luther was well known for saying we ought not make too much of the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Mother. In this he was not innovating, but following the wisdom of St. Basil the Great. In a

Christmas homily, that great father once observed:

For "he did not know her" — it says — "until she gave birth to a Son, her first-born." But this could make one suppose that Mary, after having offered in all her purity her own service in giving birth to the Lord, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, did not subsequently refrain from normal conjugal relations. That would not have affected the teaching of our religion at all, because Mary's virginity was necessary until the service of the Incarnation, and what happened afterward need not be investigated in order to affect the doctrine of the mystery. But since the lovers of Christ [that is, the faithful] do not allow themselves to hear that the Mother of God ceased at a given moment to be a virgin, we consider their testimony sufficient. [*Patrologia Graeca* 31:1468]

### No truck with deniers

Yet Luther also had no truck with those who denied her ever-virginity. He wrote scathingly:

Helvidius, that fool, was also willing to credit Mary with more sons after Christ's birth because of the words of the Evangelist: 'And he knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born Son.' This had to be understood, so he thought, as though she had more sons after the first-born Son. How stupid he was! He received a fitting answer from Jerome. [St. Louis ed. XX:2098, cited in Pieper II:308]

Thus, though Luther was opposed to making a great issue of the tradition, he certainly believed it and not only wrote about it, but preached it. In his homily on the Eve of the Day of Circumcision in 1541, only a few short years before his death, he proclaimed:

Now, although Mary was not required

to do this—the Law of Moses having no claim over her, for she had given birth without pain and her virginity remained unsullied—nevertheless, she kept quiet and submitted herself to the common law of all women, and let herself be accounted unclean. She was, without doubt, a pure, chaste virgin before the birth, in the birth, and after the birth, and could certainly have gone out of the house after giving birth, not only because of her exemption from the Law, but because of the interrupted soundness of her body. For her son did not detract from her virginity, but actually strengthened it. [*House Postils* III:256]

### Not just catholic leftovers

Nor may we suppose this a bit of medieval catholic leftovers that the fervor of the Gospel had not yet cleansed from the great Reformer. A century after the Reformation, Johann Gerhard's *Sacred Meditations* announced:

He is the first and only-begotten of His mother here on earth, who according to His divine nature is the first and only-begotten of His Father in heaven. [*Sacred Meditations* XIV]

And in Gerhard's Christmas homilies, the perpetual virginity remained a recurring theme. For example, using typology he sees the mystery of the perpetual virginity hidden in the account of Gideon's fleece:

Thus, in Jud. 6:38,40 God performs a sign before Gideon so that the dew fell on his spread-out fleece, but the entire ground remained dry; the next morning, the fleece remained dry and the ground was wet. Thus the pure virgin Mary alone among all women, through the working of the Holy Spirit, received the Christ-dew, about which Isaiah 45:8 states: Drop down you heavens from above. Later, this dew came upon the entire earth, that is, the fruits of this birth pertain to all mankind; however, Mary once more became a dry pelt, that

is, she remained a pure virgin after the birth, just as she was before the birth. [*Postilla* I:51]

### How they read the Scriptures

The examples could be multiplied, but these will suffice to demonstrate that our Lutheran forebears both assumed, meditated upon, and publicly taught the perpetual virginity of Blessed Mary. While rightly noting that no doctrine hinges upon confessing this, they nevertheless clung to it. Why?

It was how they were taught to read the Sacred Scriptures. They firmly believed that the entirety of the Sacred Scriptures were a testimony to the Savior, and their read was typological. Thus, they found figures of Mary's perpetual virginity in the Old Testament. Not just Gideon's fleece, but Ezekiel's vision of the closed door through which none may pass but the Lord (Ez. 44:2) and Aaron's rod that budded and numerous others. Their focus was not so much upon Mary in all of this, as upon her Son, and the popular belief that being born of a virgin without violating her virginity demonstrated clearly that her Son was not only man, but truly the Logos enfleshed.

### A hermeneutic of suspicion

How do we read the Scriptures? Do we read them the same way our Lutheran forebears did? If so, we'd not be quite so shocked to discover that the Lutherans could joyfully hold to a quite old and established tradition which, while not explicit in the Sacred Scriptures, they held to be consonant with them and certainly not contradictory to them. I would humbly suggest that what matters about the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Mother is not so much the doctrinal freight of the teaching itself as the light it casts upon how we receive tradition in the Lutheran Church.

Luther once addressed the topic—not in the context of perpetual virginity, but of the baptism of infants. His words are instructive:

I did not invent it [infant baptism]. It came to me by tradition and I was persuaded by no word of Scripture that it was wrong. [*Am. Ed.* 40:254]

Such words could equally express the attitude of the

great teachers in our Churches during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries regarding, among other things, the perpetual virginity. At work here is what Charles Porterfield Krauth once observed about the difference between a Lutheran and a Reformed approach to Scripture:

In the former [the Reformed tradition], Scripture is regarded more exclusively as sole source; in the latter [the Lutheran], more as a norm of a doctrine which is evolved from the analogy of faith, and to which, consequently, the pure exegetical and confessional tradi-

tion of the Church possesses more value. [*Conservative Reformation*, p. 123]

Blessed Mary, Ever-Virgin, then, was what they received from the Church in ages before them and which no Scripture convinced them was in error. For myself, I believe we were richer in those days before a hermeneutic of suspicion about tradition (“show me where the Bible says *that*”) became so prevalent in our churches.

*Pr. William Weedon serves St. Paul Lutheran Church (LCMS), Hamel, IL. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.*

## Bedtime prayers

by Paul Gregory Alms



Rituals are more than habits. They are habits with a purpose. Our family is a great believer in rituals and they not only move our children to do something but also teach them. A table must be set before you can eat; bathing is a good idea for yourself and for those around you; and so on. Rituals are habits that shape and form a person.

One particular ritual that I have been thinking about lately is nighttime prayer. There are two prayers that have become a part of our children going to bed. One is a simple family prayer that my wife started when the kids were infants that has grown over the years. In it we give thanks for each other and God's presence and ask forgiveness for any sins and finally we ask that Jesus would be with us in the night. The second is Martin Luther's evening prayer which concludes: “Into your hands we commend ourselves, our bodies and souls and all things. Let your holy angel be with us that the wicked foe may have no power over us.”

### The sleep of death

I have to come to recognize that though these are prayers for sleeping, they are also prayers for dying. They fit in either case. Death and sleep go together. The dark has always reminded humankind of the mystery of death. The puzzle of sleep is the puzzle of death. We say that Christians who die are

asleep in the Lord. The images are commonplace: the word cemetery means “sleeping place” and gravestones display the moniker “R.I.P.” (*Requiescat in pacem*, or “Rest in Peace”) Resurrection for the Christian is being awakened by the alarm clock of the last trumpet and rising from the bed of death to the joyful morning of eternity. Death and sleep go together.

When we teach our children how to fall asleep, we are showing them the Christian way of coping with death. Evening prayers are important. It is no accident that Luther's evening prayer echoes Christ's prayer on the cross commending his spirit into the Father's hands. We face the night as Christ faced that deepest darkness: alone, at last. Sleep robs us of our abilities so that we must finally surrender to it. Endings force us to face our innate weakness as created fallen creatures. We can boast no strength as we lose consciousness. We can only pray with Christ that the Father hear us and that his hands carry us through the darkness.

### Darkness and light

The service for the dark, Vespers, in both East and West, leads Christians to pray Simeon's *Nunc dimittis*. When the end of the day comes we pray Simeon's prayer for the end of life. Darkness equals death. The great hymns and prayers for the evening in the church's liturgical tradition curiously

focus on light. One might expect a straightforward emphasis on dusk and nighttime but there is light everywhere in hymns such as St. Ambrose's *Lux beata trinitas* ("O Trinity, O Blessed Light") or the Greek hymn *Phos hilaron* ("O Gladsome Light").

This is the light of Christ's victory over death. When the church meets the night, she thinks of the darkness of the grave, the three day sleep of Jesus, the death that will someday come to all. But she sings of the gladsome light of God's grace, the light which brightens every darkness, the light of the Resurrection, the light which pierces every grave, which will dawn at the last great nighttime of the world when Christ returns.

### A different posture

For most people these days, death is the great boogeyman of a godless age and of secular people. It mocks the pretensions of self-made men and sleep is the great reminder. Nighttime and going to sleep, which everyone must do from the billionaire to the baby, is like dying every day. One must close the eyes. One must cease activity. How one faces this challenge tells much of how one regards mortality. The sloppy alcoholic with his bottle, the newlyweds clutching one another through the night and the child with the closet door open for fear of monsters are all practicing their death, preparing for the end, rehearsing the moment when they, like those who have gone before them, will die. The present day avalanche of insomnia, the ubiquity of sleeping aids and the bright, middle of the night glow of televisions and computer screens and electric lights all betray the primeval terror of sinful man toward death. The electric light bulb and all its more advanced kin is a technological substitute for Easter. All of it tries in vain to transform the nighttime into the day, to rid the world, or at least the mind, of the ultimate monster under the bed, the grave.

What bedtime prayers and hymns teach is a different posture toward death. The church regards the night wide-eyed and with no illusions. The

church faces the dark and does not struggle to dismiss it but enlarges it and makes it full of the ultimate terror of death. Then the church shines the light of Christ into that evening and leads her children to pray, "Teach me to live that I may dread/ the grave as little as my bed."

### No empty bravado

What Christian parents teach in prayers for bedtime is courage, bravery in the face of the darkest foe. It is not an empty bravado that such parents pass along. No, it is a solemn strength that grows from faith in Christ and issues itself in prayer. Such prayer instills a way of looking at death that is rooted in Christ's victory, a way that passes all understanding and is outside all we feel in our flesh: that to die in the faith is just like falling asleep. You close your eyes and you go to be with Jesus and soon you will wake up. All the family will be there, all your brothers and sisters, and it will be morning and there will be breakfast and the day that never ends will be just beginning.

Nighttime can be harried in busy households. The urge to rush through or even skip the prayers at the end of the day can be strong. But we are not just hurrying our children to bed or slicing out a portion of a long day for some peace and quiet. We are imparting a posture towards death, teaching them how to die well, in trust towards the God who gave them life and will continue to give them life even in death. Evening prayers point to the Father who heard the prayer of his Son in the ultimate Friday dusk and hears our prayers at the ending of earthly light. We sing of eternal light which pierced the lonely tomb of Jesus and will carry us through to that same bright morning.

*Pastor Paul Gregory Alms serves Redeemer Lutheran Church (LCMS), Catawba, NC. His always interesting writing pops up from time to time in Lutheran Forum, Forum Letter, First Things, and who knows where else.*

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## Omnium gatherum



**Pastoral discretion** • The election is over, and those on the "winning side" are working at not gloating. But before we get too

far away from it, here's an odd thing: It is pretty much a commonplace, or so I always thought, that pastors should avoid partisan identification. Not to

say that pastors can't have partisan opinions, but they should keep them pretty much under wraps. No McCain signs on the parsonage lawn, no Obama buttons on the chasuble, that sort of thing. I'm trying to figure out, then, Bp. Mark Hanson's October 1 speech at Luther Seminary in St. Paul on, "Christians and Citizenship in Election Time," in which he made it pretty clear that he was voting for Senator Obama ([www.luthersem.edu/lectures/church\\_public\\_life/](http://www.luthersem.edu/lectures/church_public_life/)). He tried to finesse it, putting his remarks in the context of how as a "global and national religious leader" he couldn't really make an endorsement; but when he observed that his wife and six children were all voting for Obama, it was fairly clear where his sympathies were. Not that this wasn't clear enough before, of course, but we're not accustomed to the presiding bishop being quite so forthrightly partisan. That this took place in a seminary chapel only makes one question the kind of modeling of pastoral discretion the bishop was providing.

**Sentimental journey** • While I'm at it, I'm not un-supportive of the Lutheran Office of Public Policy, at least in its California incarnation. We get a lot of complicated ballot propositions here, and I'll take advice from just about anybody. The policy of LOPP-CA is to offer counsel only when they can do so "in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds, the Lutheran Confessions, and ELCA Social Statements, Messages, and Social Policy Resolutions." But when it came to Proposition 8, which sought to overturn the state Supreme Court's

legalization of gay marriage, LOPP waffled. Admitting that an ELCA Social Message in 1996 understood marriage as "a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and woman," they went on to say there was "no sentiment on the Policy Council [of LOPP] to support Prop. 8." So they didn't. Apparently sentiment trumps guidelines (to say nothing of Scripture, creeds and confessions). There's a lot of that going around these days in the ELCA. But despite LOPP's waffling, California voters approved Proposition 8, no doubt with a good number of un-sentimental Lutheran votes.

**Counter-example** • There are places where sentiment only goes so far, however. *The Lutheran* ran a brief article about an invitation that was extended by Southern Seminary to Katrina Foster, a 1994 grad, to preach at a chapel service and hang around the campus for a while. When President Marcus Miller learned that Foster is "out of compliance," as they say, with *Vision and Expectations* (i.e., she is openly lesbian and "partnered," though still apparently on the ELCA roster), he rescinded the invitation. This happened the day before the scheduled event, which makes one wonder how it got that far since Ms. Foster has been pretty public about all this. President Miller in his public statement about the disinvitation asserted that the seminary "is called to order its common life consistent with all the expectations of the church." Kudos to him for taking an action which quite probably would not have happened at many other ELCA institutions, and which is likely to cause him considerable grief.

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